

Reflective Practice Portfolio

Michele U'Sellis

The Ohio State University

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Chapter 1: Introduction

What is a 45 year-old art teacher with a Psychology undergraduate degree to do when she finds herself working in an education environment surrounded by wise people, and would like to join the group? After panicking and thankfully passing the MAT, she applies to the “internationally known for quality” Art Education Graduate program at The Ohio State University.

To date, as a “Special Area” teacher at Meredith Dunn School in Louisville, Kentucky, I am not required to have a teaching certificate. However, professional development is highly encouraged and financially supported by my administration.

Now, to share more about the amazing school in which I teach. Starting in 1971, a part time version of what would become Meredith Dunn School was begun by two special education teachers. By 1978, a full time, private, non-profit, elementary school had become a resource for children diagnosed with learning differences in Louisville, Kentucky and its surrounding communities. Nestled within a centralized, suburban, middle class part of the city, Meredith Dunn students come from diverse populations, settings, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds. Regardless of the differentiation, all have in common the same struggle of not finding “success” in a more traditional school setting.

As it has grown, Meredith Dunn School has become nationally recognized, awarded and accredited. Our philosophy, “Where Hearts and Minds Connect,” is collaborative with prescriptive instruction in hopes to develop the whole child in measures of academics, as well as, social and emotion cognition. Students are grouped

by grade (1st-8th) according to age, instructional level and social maturity. Assessment of student progress is continuous resulting in a varied average enrollment. The school-end enrollment for 2010-2011 was just under 200 students.

All students have weekly, 45-minute art instruction, as well as, the encouraged use of art medium within the core curriculum in an attempt to support differentiation in instructional practices. The art program at Meredith Dunn is viewed as a vital tool to serve in the exploration of personal creativity, enhancement of self-esteem and expansion of cognitive development with the child. Its importance is stressed and supported by the administrative team.

The art room is attached to the main building of the school. It is self contained with its own bathroom, sinks, storage and equipment rooms due to the fact that, it is housed in what used to be the previous school's kitchen. Eight, large, two to four people tables along with the numerous windows that line the back wall, are the main focal points within the room. In an attempt to keep the focus on the teacher not the surroundings, there are minimal visual distractions for students challenged by attention issues. Even though there is limited visual stimulation, visitors often comment on the rooms' warmth and appeal. Outside the art room, and within the school halls, are bulletin boards, display cases and painted wall murals to showcase student work.

I have worked within the school for twelve years, the last seven being in the art room, two as the art room assistant, five being the art teacher. Past years have included me working in the office and as a classroom assistant while attempting to understand the complexities of our students' learning profiles. My principal took a chance when she hired me as the art teacher. My art teaching experience was "hands on" not degree

backed. I did not have an artist's portfolio, just some examples of "creative" work through out the building. Due to my large amount of respect for her, as well as my working institution, I wanted to proceed further in accomplishing my goal of becoming one of the many wise people in my learning community.

Chapter 2: Multicultural Lessons

"Consider things from another person's point of view...climb into his skin and walk around in it." Atticus Finch, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee, 1960.

As the modern day art teacher looks upon his or her students, the faces that look back are more commonly not like their own. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, "37%, or one out of every three students, are considered to be of a racial or ethnic minority background." "The enrollment of minority students in both elementary and secondary public schools has increased 73% in the last twenty-five years." In contrast, further statistical research states that, "nine out of every ten teachers are white," with the "enrollment of minorities in teacher education programs being only 15%, compared to pre-service white teachers being over 80%." (National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 2000).

Many educational experts agree that it is of utmost importance for teachers, regardless of background, to gain cultural insight with this influx of classroom diversity. No longer is it all right just to teach and treat every student the same. The truth is; culture matters. Therefore, before we as art educators can integrate tolerance and

interconnectedness within our classrooms, we need to examine our own cultural assumptions and stereotypes in order to respectfully challenge those of others.

The course, AE 767, Multicultural Art Education: Theory and Practice, was designed to provide Ohio State graduate students with information that would allow them to study, reflect and apply current theories on multicultural curriculum practice. Utilizing text, videos, discussion, and lesson development, this course examined the relevant topics of ethnicity race, economic status, gender, language, geography, religion, family, exceptionality and age. The main assignment was the development, proposal, implementation and reflection upon a service-learning lesson.

Beliefs and Values

Forming the foundation, art educators enrolled in this course began rethinking about multicultural education after viewing the appropriately named video, “Starting Small.” ([streaming1.osu.edu/ramgen/media2/arted767su\)*/starting_small.rm](http://streaming1.osu.edu/ramgen/media2/arted767su)*/starting_small.rm)) Personally, I began this class not knowing what to expect, I feared that I would need to start extensive research in geography, cultures, art representations, all before I ever began considering lessons. After viewing the above-mentioned video, I felt very relieved, inspired, and motivated. The focus was on exposure, tolerance and respect for each other. What a relief, because I did not know how my students where going to enjoy recreating porcelain Ming Dynasty vases!

Fortunately, feeling as though I teach in an environment that acknowledges and celebrates learning issues, helped to provide a foundation for diversity on a unique level. That foundation became a wonderful springboard for future work in helping my students understand who they are, as well as, others.

As stated earlier, a better understanding of others results from self-reflection and analysis. With that idea in mind, OSU students were asked to reflect upon our identity and highlight three aspects from the topics that would be later discussed. Along with those insights we were also asked to consider how our personal understanding is presented to our own students. I regretfully, but yet honestly admitted to bias. I discovered that unintentionally I found myself putting more focus on empowering my female students. Acknowledging that fact, made me aware that my same sex school background was more evident than I had previously realized.



Personal Identity Reflection Michele U'Sellis

Another important part of the foundation we were considering was the role of visual culture in relation to culture perception. Visual culture is the unconscious exposure of information that has the potential to enhance, support of misrepresent belief systems. Directly or indirectly, visual culture can affect everyone, especially youth, which is problematic. The problem being that, “in a desire for global sales, capitalist manufactures’ attempt to recreate cultural heritage, traditions and history.” (Ballengee-Morris, C. & Stuhr, P. (2001). This integral part of the course reminded me of a local high school whose mascot used to be the Seneca "Redskins" represented by a red, male,

"Indian" holding a tomahawk. Somewhere, sometime, someone (maybe an art teacher!) questioned this mascot. Seneca is now known as the "Red hawks."

Moving forward, OSU students began to examine specific cultural identifiers and topics. Previously mentioned, these categories provided through investigation and analysis. At times, I found my perceptions to more unconscious than previously considered in my initial reflection, and was appreciative when my fellow cohorts honestly claimed the same.

Ethnicity and Race:

Ethnicity and race can appear to be a standardized response, basic but hardly straightforward. Often used interchangeably in the United States, are the descriptive words ethnicity and race. Some definitions are as follows; Ethnicity is based on a person's national origin. Race is a concept that was developed by physical anthropologists for identification. (Gollnick, D.M. & Chin, P.C.) Immigration, along with an awareness and presence in global interactions and opportunity has aided United States citizens in recognizing that ethnicity and race are so much more than what a person physically presents themselves with. Hopefully, there is also the discussion of the fact that race has the potential to create the prompt for further benefits or ramifications.

Upon reflecting of racial images and visuals, I remember being a teen in the 1980's, loving to watch the weekly episode of, *The Cosby Show*. The show was unlike anything else on television at that time. It chewed up the associated, at times negative, African American stereotype and replaced it with style, humor, intelligence and reality.

As an art educator, I was stumped on how to correctly address race issues with my elementary students. Even though my school population is very diverse in learning differences, it is not diverse in its ethnicity. Currently, 7 out of 200 students are African American, two are of Asian decent, three adopted from the Ukraine, and one adopted from South American. All of these children were adopted as infants by United State, Caucasian, heterosexual parents. I want to be sensitive, appropriate, respectful and not having my students feel awkward or singled out when their race is introduced into discussions. One essay that helped me address this concern and ponder race issues was, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, (McIntosh, P.) The author dealt with the issue of the advantage of white privilege and its associated hierarchy of power. I was aware of the benefits of being a white female living in the United States, but after reading this article I know acknowledge unseen dimensions. Furthermore, It was then that I intentionally decided upon my upcoming service-learning project to deal with possible race issues, (Africa) it was to be a definite “live and learn” opportunity for all concerned.

Class and Economic Status:

Moving ahead, OSU students responded to and discussed the question of how do our perceptions of students coming from different from our own socioeconomic status groups affect what we as educators bring into the classroom. Upon honest reflection, I was aware that I go out of my way or "favor" students coming from a different SES group. These are the students whose parents may work more than one job to pay their tuition, the students who use public transportation, and the students who receive financial assistance. I can say that I do not assess them differently or expect less from them. So

why have I in the past shown them more attention? The lower SES parents are just as supportive, their students learning issue(s) on the same level, so why these students? Maybe my own personal experience of coming from a lower ESE background as a child plays a role. Or maybe, I know the reality that these students may not have as many opportunities after they leave our school environment. How I have reacted is from the viewpoint that whatever I can do now to empower them could help in the obstacles they will encounter in the future.

Language and Geography:

Realizing the importance of language and the key role it plays in identity, OSU students considered how bilingual education affect students, those that are ESL and those that are “standard” English speakers. Also considered was the question of how do and how could educators respond to Black English/African-American English. Working in a school of children diagnosed with language issues, especially related to reading and decoding, not ESL, along with a historically small percentage of African American students, I had not considered or been aware of the roots of African-American English. Along with my changing thoughts, I took the article read, *Classroom use of African American language: Educational tool or social weapon?* Williams, S.W. (1991) to my school’s curriculum director and the topic is on the agenda for an upcoming staff meeting. My hope is that this discussion will expose other educators to the issue of African-American English and its relation to our school.

Lastly, being born and raised in Kentucky, I am aware of the stereotype of a Kentucky "hillbilly" and even though we are not a deep southern state, still considered by

many to be in the south and speak with an accent. Strongly resonating with me was the quote from our text, “no matter how hard you try to master the superior language elements, your own language keeps creeping in.” (Gollnick, D.M. & Chinn, P.C., 2008) As a young adult whenever I traveled, strangers always would ask, "where are you from?" "You sound so cute" or be asked to say, "ya'll." I would think... cute... yes that's nice, but do you mean dumb? I realize now that was my projection but as a young person it made me feel intellectually inferior. I began to wonder if maybe that's how my African-American English speaking students feel.

Religion and Family:

As we continued on to the very personal concept of religion and family, OSU students were reminded of the importance that Americans place on religion. We considered the question, “Do you, can you, or should you separate your own religious beliefs from your teaching?” Honestly, I believe that I do, can, and should separate my religious beliefs from my teaching. The region in which I teach, is home to many religions. Predominantly Catholic, our next largest faith community is Christian, followed by Jewish and Baptist. I was raised Catholic and taught not to proclaim my faith and believe it to be a private matter. If religious topics surface in my classroom, I listen but do not contribute or promote further discussion. My school is non denominational which helps.

Correlating with the personal issue of religion is the topic of family. In relation to understanding its influence upon ones own belief systems and classroom transference, graduate students considered how media influences our perceptions of family. Having

grown up in a traditional family, married with a traditional family, widowed and now a stepmother in a blended family, I have experienced all the media, culture, and associations with the word family. Not until I was widowed (14 yrs ago) did I feel the sting of not having what the media promotes as an “ideal” family. Just the holiday commercials alone...! Now, as media is slowly grasping the reality of nontraditional family units, I see things evolving. Hooray for the current epic show, *Modern Family*! If you are unfamiliar, this comedy follows three inter-related families, one multicultural, one homosexual and one heterosexual.

Exceptionality and Age:

As an art teacher having only worked with a whole population of students with exceptionalities (until now I would have written, students with learning differences) I was extremely interested in the topic of exceptionality. Not having the experience of working with children seen as "gifted or talented" my passionate responses relayed to those students considered by some to be “slow learners.” OSU class discussions started with the question, “How can art educators respond to various exceptionalities? I shared this thought; “I believe that educators can start by reflecting on the quote, "disability does not result from a child's, youths or adults failure to adapt to societal demands but from society's inability to adapt to the individual." (Blady, D. (1991) Reflecting upon that quote, lets ask ourselves, how do I feel about these students? The feedback I hear from other **local**, art educators addresses the reality of already having 28-30 students, no assistant, overworked, and now throwing in a student with"issues". I fully understand and respect their stress! However, if I have learned anything from my exceptional

students, it is the rewards far out way the challenge. I have learned so much more about myself, and society than I would have if been in a different teaching environment, and for that I am extremely grateful and try hard to daily welcome each one into my classroom.

On a more academic note, learning from the other teachers and excellent administrators in my school, each of my students has an individual student plan with a primary goal for each semester. That plan can be academic or social. Parent/Guardian, student and all involved staff are made aware of that goal and some suggested strategies for accomplishment. Yes, that seems extreme and a lot of additional work but we see results. Our hope and often reality, is that students' graduate with renewed self-confidence, and empowering strategies for success.

In relation to age, OSU students pondered what things and pressures modern adolescents are experiencing. I shared with the discussion group that this topic had become a part of discussion and source of problem in my school setting this year. During the empowering, learning experiences of our students, as a staff we are noticing that our older students are classifying specific teachers as the ones who work with the students that require a more remedial setting, and upon the start of a new year, finding whose homeroom you are in is an outward indication of your IQ. As so many of us do, and especially adolescents, they want to be seen as "normal" and will often gravitate to those students who they perceive to be so. (My school's name is Meredith Dunn that has been referred to as, "Meredith Dumb" by some of their peers who attend other schools) Other OSU cohort responses lead me to remember how important it is as a teacher to be reminded what it is like to be child or adolescent in today's world.

Lesson and Unit Plan Development:

Having this valuable base of information before me, I began implementing the new and improved idea of multicultural learning into my classroom. Required, but yet eagerly anticipated, was the assignment of a multicultural student service learning project. Having previously mentioned, the focus of my lesson would be race and ethnicity.

A wonderful opportunity presented itself when a co-teacher at my school asked if her students could have an art class that dealt with Africa. Within their homeroom, these fifth grade students would be pen pals with a Peace Corps worker in Swaziland, Africa.

Mainly, my art lessons would be to take the “big idea” of the word cycle and apply it to the globe, water resources/purification and reuse, while exposing these students to life in Africa. I wanted them to learn more about the vast African culture and variance within the continent. Within our building, the students and I explored several art activities. Collaboratively, their homeroom teacher would update and copy the photos and letters that the students were receiving from their pen pal.

Teaming with the organization, Shoeman Water Project, the students and I participated in a shoe collection. The Shoeman Water Project is a non-profit charity that gives a second life to donated shoes by exporting them and selling them to retailers all over the world. Money generated provides funding for water purification systems, well drilling rigs and other supplies needed to help alleviate human suffering.

After designing posters, making morning announcements, collecting, sorting, and counting shoes, we worked on other art lessons with the focus on reuse. Included in one

of the pen pal's letters was the explanation of what children in Swaziland do for fun. She wrote about how girls and boys make things out of mud such as cars and figurines. How they build small model villages or homes using twigs and discarded materials. She also mentioned how the boys make amazing wire cars and trucks from fencing wire and the girls make jump ropes out of grasses.

Similar to the Swazi children, Meredith Dunn students used clay as a medium for forming indigenous African animals. This particular group of students has always shown interest in the construction of new objects from old. Another art project, creating functional "toys" from mixed media objects was an attempt to show a commonality of interest with children in Africa children at Meredith Dunn School.

Teaching Practices:

With lessons planned, I proceeded to abandon my old teaching practices while adopting new. My old style would have been to unintentionally misrepresent a culture. In a time crunch and ignorance, I had not considered that the art projects planned might be distorting the message I wanted to convey. Initially, I proposed this service-learning unit to include African masks. Students and I even went as far as to begin construction when I re-evaluated. We continued to construct the masks on more of a playful, fine motor exercise level but I did not take it further.

One new practice that I implemented was to keep my mouth closed and listen to their verbal accounts of observations. To summarize, encouraging, is the word I would use to describe their comments. Demonstrated by the quote from Montana, "I liked how

you showed us the pen pal pictures about kids in Africa making toys and instruments out of old things like we did in the art room.” “I love doing that!” To my surprise, instead of seeing oppression, need, and want (what their teacher observed) they saw similarity, vastness and beauty. What a perfect lesson and opportunity for me as an educator. The lesson being, meet students at their level of maturity and development, not from the head of a forty five year old.

Student Work, Physical Environment:

During this course, I was reminded not to stress when things do not go as planned or on your time schedule. Maybe because of the assignments were being evaluated by my cohorts and professor, I was overly concerned about the “correct” ways to teach multicultural. I reflected a large amount of time on the idea of perpetuation stereotypes and “doing for” instead of “doing with”, which I was feeling as though my service project was lacking. Also, I became overwhelmed with different lesson options. I had originally planned on having visiting high school students join us and create the art project involving recycled materials, along with also having a troop of African drummers visit us or travel to them. I was not allowing myself to fully enjoy time with these students. So, what I will do differently next time is to know that it does not have to be a perfect presentation and have a primary focus instead of trying to cover all realms.

Closing:

Awareness is the one thing I will take from this class. In the basic sense, an awareness that multicultural education is not just exploring the culture of a far away place. Further, multicultural education does not need be vast; it can, and should include

the situations within groups such as the exceptional learner, the aged, ones sexual orientation, and or physical challenge. Also, awareness that my students could present themselves with cultural differences that outwardly may not appear to be unique or affecting their learning situation. An example is a child who has learned a different way to use language that is incorrect in the “school world,” but correct in his or her “life world.”

Lastly, awareness that I need continued reflection upon my own unintentional bias. Uncomfortably, through out this class, I have made the realization that I do have opinions tucked away. Awareness is the beginning of good things to come.

Chapter 3: Active Research in the Art Room

“Good research can be truly transformative...It encapsulates the old saying “the truth shall make you free” (Stringer. 2008)

This essay reports on the responses, attempts, results and proposed improvements for teaching art while guided by the research class, AE 705, Research in Art Education. My reflection is based upon considering five topics. These topics are; beliefs and values, lesson plans development, teaching practices, student work and physical environment.

Realistically, not negatively, classroom action research can seem like a daunting, tedious assignment to the often overworked, overscheduled, and underpaid art educator. Already at hand are performance evaluations, student test results, and accountability all that could support job success or loss in today's field of education. The course, AE 705 was designed to provide art educators with information that would allow them to study, reflect on, and apply current theories on research, thereby improving classroom practices and hopefully alleviating additional and future job stresses and concerns. Utilizing the mediums of text, discussion, focus groups, data, categorizing and communicating, graduate students taking this course not only became empowered, they became beginning research practitioners.

Beliefs and Values

“How can action research improve education?” was one of the first questions students in this Ohio State University graduate course were asked. To answer, I can apply the case study, “Student Apathy: A Teacher Studies Her Classroom” from the text, *Action Research in Education*. (Stringer, 2008) Searching for answers of why her students were not engaged in instruction, frustrated educator Lories Dorry, systematically determined how to gain more insight by conducting research within her classroom. Involving her students in focus groups, problem identification, and problem solving, this educator’s efforts resulted in a difference in her students’ response to school. Compared to earlier in the year, now students appeared happier, more interested, and had a marked improvement in the quality of their work.

Similar to Dorry, and in an attempt to develop a foundation for work, OSU research course participants reflected upon the “life worlds” of their own students. According to the sociologist Peter Berger, “The life-world refers to the consciousness of everyday life carried by every individual that provides coherence and order to our existence.” He continued by adding, “ it is learned by individuals as they experience everyday events and interaction with the environments of their families and communities.” (Berger, Berger, & Keller, 1973)

Before proceeding further, I would like to remind the reader of my teaching environment. Meredith Dunn School is a private, non-profit, elementary school servicing children diagnosed with learning exceptionalities.

If I had to choose one word to describe my students' life world it would be struggle. Initially, they have the struggle of finding their place in a family with parents and/or siblings that are seen by others as being "normal." Normal, meaning without learning or attention issues, social anxieties, compulsive tendencies, or any combination of the above. Their struggle continues as they find themselves unsuccessful in a more traditional school setting, resulting in the admission into a different learning environment. Whereas enrolling at Meredith Dunn means that, hopefully, some of that struggle is alleviated, possibly a new struggle is placed indirectly upon the student. That new struggle now being the financial commitment and expense of a higher tuition rate upon the family's finance. Lastly, I find my students' life worlds, as well as many adolescents, being a struggle as they figure out how to fit into a society that accepts judgment and criticism, as seen in popular culture that features reality shows such as *American Idol* and *Jersey Shore*, versus their school communities that make a great effort to honor differences with respect and acceptance.

Moving along, OSU course participants examined the different types, purpose, steps and tools involved in research. We compared qualitative to quantitative, objective to naturalistic, and action to basic. Also, importantly included were discussions on the participants.

Lesson and Unit Plan Development

Unknowingly at the time, my research study began when I was asked to participate in collaboration with a fifth grade homeroom teacher. Her students would be yearlong pen pals with a Peace Corps worker in Swaziland, Africa. In the art room, I would integrate several multicultural lessons to correspond to this amazing opportunity that could be further evaluated.

Taking the big idea of the word cycle, which was a new teaching practice I was continuing to implement, I would apply it to the globe, water resources and recycling. Within the walls of our school, my group of learners, a class of fifth graders, and I, would begin to make a difference in the world!

Utilizing lessons learned from a past Ohio State multicultural class, I abandoned my once used “African” art projects. I searched for academic articles that pertained to perpetuating or assisting stereotypes of a culture or place in hopes that I would represent Africa with the utmost respect. The published article of interest to me was, “Encountering Social and Environmental Messages in The Rainforest Cafe, Children’s Picture books, and Other Visual Culture Sites” by Mira Reisberg and Sandrine Han. (*International Journal of Education and the Arts*, 2009) The scope of the study involved how educators could assist students to compare and contrast visual culture images pertaining to the rainforest. Initially, the researchers utilized a multi-method of data collection, but when interviews of patrons and staff were prohibited by upper management of the restaurant, *The Rainforest Café*, the study turned to a conceptual approach. Conceptual research involves the researcher outlining a possible course of

action or presenting a preferred approach to an idea. (Koroscik, J.S. & Kowalchuk, E., 1997)

At its conclusion, the researchers made suggestions for meaningful, rainforest themed art projects. One indirect effect would be that the students could develop an awareness of mixed messages in their visual culture. One interesting example of a mixed visual culture message that the researchers identified was that bottled drinking water often shows environmentally pristine scenes on its labels while its plastic container, if not recycled, is doing the environment and consumer more harm than good. The authors' also examined the subliminal contradictions of the restaurant environment, in relation to the purpose of protecting the rainforest. With an alternative approach to teaching this delicate environment, the authors' theoretical and pedagogical perspectives draw attention to the possible unconscious misrepresentations that we as educators further instill within our classrooms.

Teaching Practices

Proceeding on, one of my main cross-curricular art lessons involved working with the organization, *Shoeman Water Project*, a nonprofit charity extending global water aid. Students designed posters for a used shoe drive, collected, counted, estimated numbers of shoes, and made requests and gave updates during our school-wide, taped morning announcements. Part of these activities involved discussions about the similarities and differences between Africa and Kentucky and its inhabitants.

Student Work

Upon completion of their African art lessons, with extended cooperation from their classroom teacher, I chose to form a student focus group to collect the data needed for assessment. This group and I worked together alone in the art room during one of their regular, core curriculum classes.

Participating in my focus group and interviews were fifth grade, selected students consisting of four females, Bethany, Haley, Madison and Montana, and four males, Alex, Bryson, Chase and Trey. Students were chosen for their involvement or lack of involvement, related to the African art lessons. Consideration was also given to each student's learning style and processing ability. All of these students are quite verbal and Able to articulate information, but are challenged by attention issues. Except for two students, Madison and Trey all have been students at Meredith Dunn for more than one year. All appear to enjoy art and I have a friendly, respectful teacher/student relationship with each of these students. So as not to exclude the students not participating in the focus group, the nine remaining students were asked to help me with the office display case highlighting all of the work involved.

I began by asking the focus group an icebreaker question, "Can you give me an update on the latest from your African pen pal?" I was immediately aware of the challenge before me when one focus group participant called out seriously asking, "What's a pen pal?" followed by, "We have one of those?" After clarification from his peers and myself by showing him the photos sent by the African correspondent, he remembered. With everyone refocused, I wanted to know the extent of their African cultural awareness by asking what they knew about Africa before our projects, compared

to afterwards. According to one participant, “before, I thought Africa was weird, but I knew they had soccer because of the World Cup.” Another response was, “I thought it was kind of like Haiti.” As the focus group continued to lose its “focus” by students laughing at the comment, “it was fun because we got to touch nasty, gross, old shoes!” I ended the group feeling defeated and concerned that I had not effectively taught this lesson.

. After speaking with and being reassured by my professor, Dr. Karen Hutzal, I opted to try individual interviews instead of the larger focus group discussion. One would think that a teacher working with students challenged by focus issues should have known to try the individual interview process instead of a group discussion! Never having had students involved in participant research, my intention was to make all of the participants comfortable, including those students who appeared to be less engaged in the art activities. I speculated that these students would more actively participate in the reflection if I did not speak with them in a one on one situation. These particular students, in the past, have spent some time in the office for redirection of and reflection on their behavior.

Having prepared additional questions, having visual clues on hand, and having a quiet art room available, I began the interviews. This time, I decided to have students come to the setting in pairs. They were made aware of the reason for discussion and were made more familiar with the topic ahead of time. Although it was a more intimate conversation setting, the students appeared to be comfortable.

Overall, the responses from the interviews were less rushed and included more thoughtful answers. Wanting the children to celebrate and respect people often seen as

different, it was important to me to become aware of the students' perception of the similarities and differences between middle school students in Africa and middle school students in Kentucky/the United States. During her interview, Montana made the comment, "I liked how you showed us the pictures and videos about kids in Africa making new toys and instruments out of old things, like we were doing in the shoe drive. I love making things like that too!" The notion of respect was apparent in other participant comments as well. Chase responded by saying, "Kids in Africa are different, but that's cool."

Moving on, when asked about the focus of collaboration between their homeroom and art class, I was surprised to hear Alex's comment, "I don't like it as much because when I come to art, I want to learn different things other than what we're learning in our homeroom." That sentiment was echoed by another answer from Haley, "I don't like it." "When we come to art it gives me a break from my homeroom stuff." Other comments also related to the idea of separating homeroom and art room.

When asked about the big idea of cycle, I discovered that the students struggled with the abstract thought process involved in applying the concept of cycle into their artwork. They did, though, remember the discussion of how water goes through a cycle.

Lastly, when asked about which one of our art projects contained the most meaning and why, Haley responded, "The toys, because when I went home I looked on the Internet at more African toys." "It was interesting stuff." That was followed by Alex's comment: "The shoe drive because it was always a mystery of what shoes we'd pull out of the bags and it was fun helping people get clean water." "We all should have clean water to drink no matter where you live."

Physical Environment

After analyzing the data, I had a firmer assessment on the outcomes of my students learning. My students have a broader idea of Africa with its rich artisan culture, its people, and their living conditions. Also, I would consider the shoe drive to be somewhat of a success and the beginning of future art room sponsored service projects.

Further analyzing made me aware of the large amount of empathy and respect that these young fifth graders are capable of was very apparent in the answers they provided during observation as well as focus group. Aside from the original focus group participant's statement about touching "nasty, gross" shoes, almost all of my students were eager to help and demonstrated the required maturity needed for the project. However, I do need to remind myself to meet my students where they are age appropriately. They are not 45 year olds, but fifth graders who more than likely want to impress each other, not change the world. My hope is that these lessons will set the stage for bigger, future work that will give them the confidence to participate in the environment around them. On a side note, I have already witnessed a suggestion that this opportunity is taking place.

Recently, to my surprise, as this class entered the art room, one of the quieter male participants in the focus group walked in beating on an authentic African drum. Trey had all of us captivated by the beat and craftsmanship of the instrument. He told me that he had gone home and told his dad about the "African things" we were doing. Following the classroom "jam session," at his father's suggestion and with Trey's agreement the drum is now a donation to our Arts department.

With all the successes, though, there were still some discouragements and difficulties. Typically, my teaching style is flexible and relaxed, but I worried that negative outcomes would reflect on my teaching ability. I wanted solid results to share with my peers and professor. As a result, I became overly concerned about the “correct” ways to research. Basic concerns consisted of appropriate lessons, questions and resources.

As earlier reported, my focus group did not go well. I considered many explanations of why the results were not as what I had hoped them to be. One explanation I had considered was that, on the day of the focus group, the students’ classroom schedule had changed. I have come to realize that any alteration in routine can have an adverse effect on my students. I was also reminded that this class in particular, likes to joke, impress each other and be fun loving, which at times is so enjoyable, though not necessarily during a focus group. Upon reflection, my focus group was successful because it indirectly allowed me to discover that what was lacking was not a result of my students being off schedule or having fun, it was the simple fact that many in the focus group could not recall information, because there were too many issues presented. My students had difficulty answering the questions because their art teacher took them on an unfocused journey to Africa.

Taking Action

During a discussion on this subject, another teacher reminded me of what I tell my students...“lets focus on the process, not the product.” With that in mind and with further reflection, the most important thing that I would do differently next time would be to focus on one task instead of trying to implement several activities, hoping that at least

one concept will make a lasting impression. I have found that with my type of learners, I often try to approach and present the lesson in different ways. Like other teachers, if I sense that a class has struggled with a project the week before, I will revisit the concept in a new way the following week. So when the opportunity arises, instead of offering several different activities with a similar theme, I will only offer a focused and well-developed approach to one particular theme. It is no wonder that my students had difficulty recalling the big idea of “cycle.” They were in their own fast paced, “cycle” attempting to stay present in the many activities and topics. I believe that the concept of big ideas will work and deserves further investigation with this type of concrete learner. However, I understand that until my students have more experience and a firmer grasp on big ideas, lessons based on a big idea, such as cycle, should be the sole purpose, not used in collaboration with corresponding lessons. With this new approach, I believe that the stress level will decrease.

Presently, I am unsure how I will proceed with collaborative lessons. My administration strongly encourages learning themes to travel into different subject areas. I too believe in the benefits of students having more than one teaching area support a concept, and have worked hard to welcome my fellow teachers into the area of art. According to my student interviews, however, many students would prefer that their subjects not be cross curricular.

I always strive for reflection upon my art lessons. This paper and class have allowed me the luxury to investigate a chosen few of my lessons on a deeper level. As so many of the text case studies mentioned, the educators conducting the action research noticed the contribution and involvement of their students. Using terms such as “dialogic

community” and “action committee” I found very simple but powerful. As mentioned previously, my school strives to help its population gain the skills and confidence necessary to succeed in class and in life. Thankfully, this OSU class has helped me to further carry out that mission from the art room.

Similar to previous Ohio State University classes, the educator truly became the learner. According to our text, “research provides people with the means to expand their expertise and improve their professional capabilities.” (Stringer, p.3) Teachers today meet many challenges ... lack of time, high student population, to name only a few. Research may be the last on the list of many to-do checklists. We are often exhausted, and underpaid so many might ask why go to all the trouble? To that I respond, “tell me why you became a teacher?”

Chapter 4: SYNTHESIS

In conclusion, there are numerous words that I could use to explain my learning experience as a graduate student in the Art Education program. To highlight a chosen few, they would be: challenge, exposure, and potential.

To begin, I would use the word challenge not for the obvious work and time requirements but for the implementation of topics covered. Being taken out of my comfort zone, no longer could I just allow myself to focus on teaching my elementary students an art medium technique or a craft. While participating in the multicultural class, Dr. Hutzel brought to students' attention how we, as art educators, could possibly unintentionally perpetuate stereotypes. I wanted the challenge of respectfully conveying to my students the uniqueness and diversity within our school, community and world. No more "toilet paper totem poles" for us!

Prior to my graduate work at OSU, my exposure to art education related topics was the annual National Art Educators Association Conference, or brainstorming with other local art educators that I had befriended. Not only did OSU expose me to leaders in the field of art education as professors and cutting edge curriculum, the program introduced me to cohorts from all over the United States. Working in my "sheltered" (private, non-profit) teaching environment has its benefits, however, it is not always realistic or indicative of the "norm". I am now more current with educational mandates, issues and concerns from those working in the trenches. As a result, I am becoming a stronger advocate in the field.

The final word I would use to describe my learning experience in the program is potential. Indicating the positive, professionally, as well as, personally I find myself with

an increased feeling of self-confidence. Without too much self-indulgence professionally, I feel more credible, personally I feel more validated.

Key Changes

To elaborate on the above, the two key changes in my teaching that have great potential are the increased awareness gained in teacher reflection and the development of more meaningful student lessons. Luckily, having a reflective personality I seemed to easily consider topics that were being presented by professors or co-horts. One tough topic for reflection from Dr. Eisenhower's class, Designing Meaningful Curriculum OSU students addressed the question, "If this were the last art class my student were to take, what do they need to know in order to have a lifelong engagement with art?" I now repeatedly ask myself that same question and plan my lessons around it. It was always so disheartening to have students intentionally leaves their artwork in the trashcan. Although I still am witness to it, more often my student's are asking, "When are we going to get this back?" or "Can we take this home today?"

Continuing in another class, Multicultural Art Education with Dr.Hutzel, we "unpacked our knapsacks" to become aware of any hidden agendas or perceptions. Prior to OSU, my teaching reflections were not as purposeful. As I complete my Master's degree, my reflections include, research, feedback and results.

Areas to Continue

In every graduate class, there were beneficial pieces of knowledge to develop my understanding of art education. Even though the classes are coming to a close, the intrigue continues. There are several areas in which I will continue to explore. The topic of visual culture and its implications is of great interest to me. Beginning this school year,

my schools counselor, an art therapist, is also the middle school social skills teacher. Often, I found that my attempts to provide meaningful art lessons were similar to an activity that she had previously presented. In a round about way she was highlighting visual culture and “big ideas.” I so appreciated our similar interest and desired student outcome, but think the students would benefit if she and I could plan differently or even collaborate on future art projects.

Addressing the topic of “big ideas” I have found success, as well as, some “live and learns.” Overall, my students have processing issues. Many of them prefer the concrete rather than the gray area of cognitive thinking, which is an important skill to develop but developing that skill may find students frustrated. In an attempt to make more meaningful art connections I want to continue my small steps in developing lessons around a main, “big” idea.

In another attempt to further develop my students’ cognitive skills, I will continue to implement suggestions from Dr. Eisenhower’s class, Teaching Art Criticism. Initially I started with a monthly challenge of having students look for “hidden” artwork within our building. Once found and reported, as a group we would discuss the work objectively at the their developmental level. My older students have become familiar with quick writes in relation to art criticism. We have gone from student statements, “I like it because...” to basic teacher questions such as, “Which work shows an example of visual perspective?”

Being in a non-traditional setting, my students are assessed differently than most, they are only given a mark for performance consistency not skill or ability. I now implement process-folios instead of portfolios. Also, in an attempt to assess my new art

lessons I have, and will continue to utilize more action research. I have found the anonymous feedback sheet to be a great assessment tool not only for teaching strategies but also as an honest, non-threatening way for my students to respond to a lesson.

Questions

Finally, what else could a graduating OSU Art Education graduate student want to know? For me, there will be the question of how to apply the “new” way to teach art with education standards, “old” way of thinking. Even though my classes have prompted dialogue about restructuring my schools’ current art curriculum, until its completion, I still need to cover a lot of themes based solely on technique.

The educator has become the student and even though I am looking forward to the improved, I do not want to lose the motivation and direction that this program has provided. My question would be, “then how?” At this point in my life, I do not foresee myself continuing to become a doctoral candidate. But then again, three years ago, I did not see myself spending summers in Columbus, Ohio.

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